




2-18-2016

What is Religious Freedom?

Brent Hege

Butler University, bhege@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hege, Brent, "What is Religious Freedom?" *Butler University Brown Bag Series* / (2016): -. Available at http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/850

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

What Is Religious Freedom?

Brent A. R. Hege

Butler University Brown Bag – February 18, 2016

Introduction

What is religious freedom? This is obviously a complicated question and one that plays a central role in the debates concerning Indiana's Religious Freedom Restoration Act and similar legislation in twenty-one other states, and it has only increased in intensity in the aftermath of this past summer's landmark Supreme Court decision that legalized same-sex marriage across the United States. There are other important areas where questions of the meaning and scope of religious freedom and religious tolerance play a central role, such as the recent increase of extreme anti-Muslim rhetoric expressed by a number of prominent politicians and political pundits (that would take at least another paper to sketch out), but for our purposes here I want to focus on the issue that gripped so many Hoosiers and put our state in the national spotlight last year. Supporters of Indiana's RFRA claim that their religious freedom is violated or might be violated by government requirements to provide equal service to LGBT Hoosiers and to accept the legality of same-sex marriage, and they base these views on a particular type of biblical hermeneutics and beliefs derived from those hermeneutics (issues I've discussed elsewhere in connection with Kentucky's Creation Museum). But for our purposes here today I am more interested in the operative definition of religious freedom in these cases and in the broader context of our secular republic. I want to argue that Indiana's governor and the legislators responsible for the passage of the RFRA, as well as many of its supporters, have a deficient conception of Christian freedom, but I also want to suggest that they have uncovered deep-seated tensions and ambiguities that problematize the modern distinction between the religious and the secular, particularly as this distinction is enshrined in the First Amendment.

My paper is divided roughly into four parts. In the first part, I define freedom in both its religious and political meanings. In the second part, I interrogate the assumed definition of religion operative in the American political context. In the third part, I discuss the historical roots of the separation of church and state. In the final part, I ask some challenging and open-ended questions about the relationship between religion, freedom, rights, and law in the American political system.

What Is Freedom in a Religious Context?

To begin, we need to understand how freedom has been understood within the Christian tradition as it relates to contemporary debates and controversies. There are two aspects of freedom: negative freedom (freedom “from”) and positive freedom (freedom “for”). I want to argue that the RFRA neglects positive freedom and draws solely on the negative conception of freedom, which, as we will see, fundamentally misconstrues a richer theological articulation of Christian freedom. For that richer definition I will appeal to its earliest Protestant description in Martin Luther’s famous essay, *The Freedom of a Christian*, published in 1520. (Full disclosure: I am a Lutheran Christian, and while there are other Christian theological approaches to the question of religious freedom, some compatible with mine and others not, I will be working within the Lutheran conceptual framework in what follows.)

Written in the earliest stages of the Protestant Reformations, Luther’s discussion of Christian freedom represents in many ways the first modern discussion of freedom, as Luther here and elsewhere distinguishes between private and public, interior and exterior, spiritual and temporal (this can be problematic when applied in other contexts, and we’ll return to this later).

Luther begins the essay with a simple but paradoxical statement: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject

to all.” The paradox is resolved in Luther’s distinction between the interior and the exterior person. The heart of Luther’s teaching is that the individual is saved by God through grace by faith and not by anything they do to earn their salvation. There is therefore freedom from anxiety, fear, condemnation, and compulsion to earn one’s salvation through rigorous legalism and moral purity. All of these constitute freedom “from.” However, this does not exhaust the meaning of freedom and is in fact only half of the definition, which remains woefully incomplete and misunderstood without its second half.

The second half of the definition is the culmination of the first: as a result of the pure gift of salvation that is not earned but gratefully accepted, the Christian is then set free *for* loving service and care for the neighbor. Moral purity and good works do not save, but good works of love and service do flow naturally from those who have already been saved by divine grace alone. All of this constitutes freedom “for.” Freedom, for Luther, is always freedom “from” *and* freedom “for.” To put it another way, freedom “from” is the source and possibility of freedom “for,” without which freedom itself is meaningless and faith is a ruse. The key ingredient in positive freedom is love: as Paul put it in Galatians 5:6, “the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

The negative freedom “from” liberates one from the works that were assumed to merit salvation but which always end in failure, anxiety, and broken relationships. But the transition from freedom “from” to freedom “for” is made possible by divine love, grace, and gift, which effect a radical transformation of the person from an anxious, self-righteous moralizer to a liberated, grateful, selfless servant of all. Christians as “perfectly free lords” are liberated from the constraints of the law that says, “You must do this to earn God’s love and acceptance,” and set free to be “perfectly dutiful servants of all,” precisely because they themselves have first been

loved, thus caring nothing for their own gain or loss but fully giving of themselves in love to their neighbor in gratitude and joy.

This freedom expressed in loving service to the neighbor is related to Luther's doctrine of vocation, or "calling." In the Middle Ages, "vocation" referred to monastic or clerical vows and only monks, nuns, and priests were said to have a vocation because they had been "called out" of the world to serve God exclusively. Luther (himself a priest and former monk) inverts this and talks about vocation in the quotidian details of the everyday lives of the people from all walks of life in the parishes he pastored. In one of his sermons Luther asks what Christian vocation means in the context of both political and economic life:

The prince should think: Christ has served me and made everything to follow him; therefore, I should also serve my neighbors, protect them and everything that belongs to them. That is why God has given me this office, and I have it that I might serve God. That would be a good prince and ruler. When a prince sees his neighbor oppressed, he should think: That concerns me! I must protect and shield my neighbor....The same is true for the shoemaker, tailor, scribe, or reader. If he is a Christian tailor, he will say: I make these clothes because God has bidden me do so, so that I can earn a living, so that I can help and serve my neighbor. *When a Christian does not serve the other, God is not present; that is not Christian living.* ("Sermon in the Castle Church at Weimar, 25 October 1522," WA 10/3, 382, translation and emphasis mine)

What Luther means by Christian vocation is loving service, not mere displays of piety, or strict adherence to a new set of religious laws, rules, and regulations, or exclusion of the other. For Luther, vocation is always a matter of freedom for loving service of the neighbor, never a matter of freedom to deny service to those who are judged to be unworthy. God is served in the service of others; this is the meaning of positive freedom for Luther. His thoughts on being set free for loving service are reminiscent of the first epistle of John:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because [God] first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not

seen. The commandment we have from [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:16b, 18-21)

This conception of Christian freedom as freedom for fearless, loving service of the neighbor is precisely what is missing in the rhetoric supporting the RFRA.

What Is Freedom in a Secular Political Context?

The second question to ask here is what freedom means in a secular political context. Unlike Luther's theological view of freedom "from" making possible a radical freedom "for" the neighbor, in a secular political context freedom tends to be construed exclusively as freedom "from" certain constraints, regulations, or restrictions. The classic statement of freedom in a secular political context is John Locke's summary of natural rights to life, liberty, and estate (all included under the concept of "property") in his *Two Treatises of Government*. Each of these rights is constituted as a freedom "from" infringement by other parties and the state, simultaneously guaranteed by the state and also restricting the state's reach into the lives of its citizens. One of the classic illustrations of the scope of a citizen's rights and freedoms is that my rights and freedom stop where my neighbors' start, so that my rights and freedom do not allow me to impinge on my neighbors' rights and freedom. However, in the RFRA, this limitation on rights and freedom has been weakened so that an appeal to religious freedom seemingly permits the violation or impingement of another's rights and freedoms.

A rights-based approach to freedom "from" is expanded in the United States Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights. In the First Amendment additional freedoms are guaranteed and each assumes a fundamentally negative view of freedom as being freedom "from" government intrusions into private life. These rights include freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom to petition the government, and freedom of religion.

Obviously it's the last of these freedoms that most concerns us here. What does freedom of religion mean in an American political context? The First Amendment guarantees that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." What's interesting here is that the First Amendment includes both the freedom from religious coercion and the freedom to practice religion however one sees fit. The government will not establish religion, which means that no particular religious tradition will be established or privileged as the official religion of the state. But the second part is equally important: every citizen will be free to practice their religion, free from government intrusion or regulation. What is less clear is where precisely we draw the boundary between freedom "for" and freedom "from" religion in the First Amendment.

Eleven years later, Thomas Jefferson referred to this amendment in a letter to the Baptist congregation in Danbury, Connecticut, to allay their fears of government intrusion into religious matters (my colleague James McGrath can say much more about the important role that political freedom of religion has historically played in the Baptist tradition). I'll quote part of Jefferson's letter:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man [sic] & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.

Two things in this passage especially interest me. The first is Jefferson's assumption that religion is a matter of opinion only and not action, which confirms a common Enlightenment conception of religion as an exclusively private, interior affair (we'll return to this later). The second is the famous reference to a wall of separation between church and state, which is ground zero for every argument about the relationship between politics and religion in the history of the United

States, and a reference that is frequently ignored or outright rejected in some conservative Christian circles. As profoundly influential as Jefferson's thoughts on religion have proved to be, I must question his assumption that religion is restricted to matters of opinion only and not actions. In the process, we will have to reconsider the strength of that wall he erected between church and state, but for quite different reasons than those suggested by many on the Christian right.

What Is Religion?

Before we get there, though, we have to figure out just what we mean by "religion" and we will come to see that the concept of religion is far more problematic, malleable, and historically contingent than we might have realized. Religion is one of those concepts that everyone assumes they understand until they actually spend a few minutes thinking about it. Religion is notoriously difficult to define, so much so that many scholars, starting with Wilfred Cantwell Smith in the 1960s, have called for an outright rejection of the term itself, or at the very least a modification to the plural "religions" or the adjectival "religious traditions." Religion is such a difficult concept to nail down – and here I must risk being seriously misquoted – that I often tell my students that religion is like pornography: as Justice Potter Stewart said in a 1964 Supreme Court obscenity case, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [i.e. as obscene or pornographic] ... But I know it when I see it."

Nevertheless, for our purposes here it will be helpful to provide a brief list of features we would expect to see in a tradition we would commonly label "religious," and I am taking this list from the textbook I use in my world religions course:

A sense of sacredness or transcendence, a comprehensive worldview, community, myths and symbols, characteristic emotional experiences, ritual, shared beliefs, ethical guidelines, material expression.

This is a helpful list of features to assist us in defining the complex phenomenon of religion.

Notice here that very little attention is paid to beliefs or opinions. Above all, religion is a matter of identity and the creation of meaning through a comprehensive worldview and particular practices. Already Jefferson's restriction of religion to a matter of interior opinion is looking quite anemic and misleading.

There are specific historical reasons why we have difficulty defining religion and why even the act of attempting a definition has been fraught with conflict and enormous historical, cultural, and political consequences. The etymology of the word "religion" refers to a reconnection or a binding of oneself to something else (it shares a root with our words "ligament" and "rely"). In medieval Europe, the term was used to distinguish monks and nuns from clergy who did not belong to one of the monastic orders (so-called "secular" clergy); even today in the Roman Catholic tradition monks and nuns are referred to as men and women religious. Likewise, in the early and medieval church to say that something is *vera religio* meant that it is truly religious, truly pious. Eventually, however, "religion" came to be equated with the entire Christian tradition and its institutions, practices, and beliefs. This happened around the period of the Protestant Reformations, when now there were rival Christian traditions each claiming to be the true church and thus needing some intellectual and institutional basis for distinguishing and critiquing rival traditions. At this point, *vera religio* no longer referred to a way of being religious; it now referred to the (one) true religion.

During the Age of Exploration and the first waves of modern European colonialism, Europeans came into contact with ancient traditions of southern and eastern Asia, which they

termed “Hinduism” in India and “Buddhism” in East and Southeast Asia. This was particularly problematic in India, where the word “Hindu” was derived from a Persian word that simply referred to anyone living south of the Indus River and later was used to refer to all of the Indian religious traditions. It was only when European traders arrived on the scene and lumped hundreds of disparate traditions into one deceptively unified category that we got what we now know as “Hinduism” as opposed to the other Indian traditions of Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. As colonial regimes in South Asia and elsewhere were modeled to a large extent on the pattern of Western secular states, indigenous “religions” were categorized and forced to occupy a separate, interior space, being displaced from the center of social, cultural, economic, and political life, altering their nature in the process and having far-reaching consequences that we still see playing out today in a number of ways all over the world.

This relegation of religion to a separate interior realm was especially problematic because there was no such separation in the places colonized by Europeans, and none until only recently in Europe as well. This is illustrated by the lack of words in many non-European languages for what we popularly understand by “religion.” In Indian traditions the word usually translated as “religion” is *dharma*, which is notoriously difficult to translate adequately but generally refers to teaching, law, duty, the cosmic order, etc., all of which govern every aspect of human life (and beyond). In Arabic the word usually translated as “religion” is *din*, which refers to conforming to a way of life that permeates all aspects of existence. In Hebrew the word is *halakha*, which refers to the whole body of Jewish law and teaching, including both “religious” and “secular” law (although Judaism makes no distinction between the two). Chinese is a particularly interesting example because today it does have a word that corresponds fairly closely to what we mean by “religion”: *zongjiao*, or “teaching of the sects.” But this word was only created in the 19th

century specifically in response to Christian missionary activity. Before that the word typically used was just *jiao* (“teaching”) but that usually only referred to Buddhism, Daoism, and sometimes Confucianism, traditions that had become fairly institutionalized, and left out much of Chinese traditional religion, which was much more diffuse and far more concerned with practice and ritual than with doctrine.

The Historical Roots of the Separation of Church and State

This etymological history is significant because it shows that the very notion of “religion” as we understand it today – as a separate institution that orders and governs a primarily interior space in the individual and is related above all to beliefs – is by no means a universally accepted definition but has its own unique historical trajectory rooted in the Protestant Reformations and especially in the Enlightenment formation of the person as an autonomous subject. Without understanding that history, our current debates concerning the place and limits of religion in a secular state would make very little sense.

As I mentioned earlier, the distinction between the “religious” and the “secular” dates to the Middle Ages, but it referred to two types of ecclesiastical “professionals”: the “religious,” who withdrew from the world to live, work, and pray in monasteries, and the “secular,” who did their ministry in the world without belonging to one of the monastic orders. It would have come as quite a surprise to medieval secular clergy to be told that because they were “secular” they were therefore not “religious,” as we currently understand those terms. However, something important happened in the Protestant Reformations that directly led to our current understanding of the religious and the secular as being unique and separate spheres.

Partly in response to the medieval Roman Catholic mingling of religion, politics, and economics, sometimes with rather dire consequences, the Protestant Reformers sought to limit

the power of the papacy in these and other areas, and in this they were enthusiastically supported and encouraged by princes and city councils who wanted to assert their independence from Rome. (The fact that the modern nation-state emerges when and where it did is no historical accident!) Once rival Protestant traditions emerged and gained a foothold, this pattern of categorizing and systematizing only increased in frequency and intensity, especially in the period of the Wars of Religion a century after the Protestant Reformations.

But the first and most influential Protestant formulation of this separation was Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. Luther suggested that the world was split into two realms or kingdoms, the spiritual and the temporal, both ruled by God but through different instruments or representatives. The spiritual kingdom was ruled by the church and governed the interior life of the soul by grace. The temporal kingdom was ruled by the state and governed the exterior life of society, politics, and economics by law. These two kingdoms ought to be absolutely independent and neither authority should meddle in the affairs of the other. Therefore Christians were called to obey civil authority as instituted by God for the general welfare of the state (here Luther is drawing on Paul's discussion in Romans 13 of the duty of Christians to obey civil authorities). Civil authorities were called to respect the conscience of their citizens and allow ecclesiastical authorities full rein over the souls of their flock. This might have sounded like a feasible solution for avoiding conflicts between civil and ecclesiastical authorities, but in fact the generations after Luther were embroiled in a bitter war between Protestants and Roman Catholics in which religious, political, and economic motivations were impossible to disentangle until the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 attempted a solution with what came to be called the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* ("whose realm, his religion"). It took almost a century for this principle to be thoroughly established in European affairs, after the horrific Thirty Years War that ended with

the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and created many of the nation-states, along with their traditional confessional affiliations, that we know today.

Partly as a response to this unprecedented violence ostensibly in the name of religion (the actual causes of these wars were far more complex than simply religious disagreements), the Enlightenment *philosophes* sought a foundation of certainty and security entirely free from religion, and they claimed to have found it in reason alone. Reason, they argued, was entirely free from prejudice, sectarian passion, emotional obfuscation, superstition, and blind obedience to authority. If only each person followed their innate reason, they assumed that peace and progress would inevitably follow.

Some theologians attempted to square Christian doctrine with the new fashion for reason and science, creating Deism, which aptly describes the religious commitments of many of the American founders, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. Others ceded the field to reason and retreated into the interior life of emotion and opinion, both approaches helping to pave the way for a strict separation between church and state, which many at the time believed would finally bring an end to the religious violence that had plagued Europe for over a century. That they were spectacularly wrong about this should come as no surprise to any of us.

The Enlightenment prioritized the inviolability of the conscience as the locus of freedom, declaring that each man (and they usually meant just men) was free to have his own beliefs about anything at all, including religion, because beliefs were a matter of private conscience and should stay private. Thomas Jefferson famously said in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that it made no difference to him whether his neighbors believed in twenty gods or no god; it had no bearing whatsoever on their conduct in a secular society. Religion had become a matter of belief alone,

and utterly private. Those Enlightenment thinkers who still saw some value in religion nevertheless restricted it to one particular sphere of human activity, and perhaps the most famous of the Enlightenment philosophers, Immanuel Kant, wrote a book called *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in which he subsumed religion under ethics (or what he called elsewhere “practical reason”) and sought to eliminate everything “irrational” from religion, including ritual, myth, and symbols, and with them virtually everything that makes religion what it is. The goal in the Enlightenment was the complete separation of religion from the secular realm of politics, law, and economics.

It is in this broader context that we must understand the First Amendment, which is a thoroughly modern, Enlightenment delineation of the meaning and scope of religion. Interestingly enough, its primary author, James Madison, specifically mentioned Luther’s doctrine of the Two Kingdoms as an important influence on his own views of the separation of church and state (Letter to F. L. Schaeffer, 3 December 1821). Thomas Jefferson in particular embodied this view of religion as a separate sphere that should remain completely separate from the political life of the new republic, both in his famous *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* and in his establishment of the University of Virginia as the first American university without a faculty of theology or any religious affiliation. Jefferson hoped that religion would be an entirely private matter of belief and opinion and that the public sphere would be governed by reason alone. The future of the young republic, he and many others thought, depended on a strict separation of church and state. The great irony, however, is that such a separation was only possible thanks to one particular trajectory of the Protestant Reformations and therefore always remained in important ways deeply “religious” in its definitions and assumptions.

Why This Is Problematic

Despite the laudable attempt to eliminate an important source of conflict and violence from the American secular experiment, it was perhaps inevitable that the separation could not be maintained, and for a number of reasons. One reason is that the desire for and, more significantly, the possibility of the separation of church and state is itself rooted in the mainline Protestant tradition, as we have already seen, and this tradition's normative influence on American life is quickly waning (see recent Pew polls for an indication of the new reality of a post-Christian United States). But perhaps the most important reason is that religion simply cannot be isolated from the rest of human life, and in fact such a separation would have been inconceivable anywhere on Earth until the Protestant Reformations and their aftermath. The Reformers themselves had a far more fluid understanding of the relationship between church and state and public and private than is often assumed, especially by James Madison, and it was only in the generations after the original Reformers that religion became primarily a matter of private beliefs rather than a matter of identity and a worldview that permeated every aspect of life.

The interiority of religion assumed by the Founders was a recent development and one that never fully took hold in most religious people, regardless of their affiliation (and this is true even of many mainline Protestants who inherited the tradition that made such a separation possible in the first place). As we have seen, religion is a notoriously difficult concept to define clearly precisely because of its all-encompassing nature. Most significantly, religion will always influence praxis because religion is as much a matter of *doing* as it is a matter of *believing* or *feeling*, and in many religious traditions it is far more a matter of *doing* than either of the latter faculties. Even in Protestant Christianity, where this separation originated, the boundary separating belief and praxis is far blurrier than the framers ever assumed.

Religion will never remain entirely private because religion always informs how religious people live and act in the world. I can use myself as an example: I hold every single one of my political, social, and economic beliefs *because* of my Lutheran identity and commitments, not *in spite of* them. It just so happens that my religious commitments lead me to political, social, and economic beliefs and practices that are more or less consistent with modern secular democracy, but that is in large part because modern secular democracy is in many ways a result of trajectories set in motion in and by the Protestant Reformations. We need only look to the colonial and post-colonial Middle East as one often tragic example of a far less happy marriage of religious commitment and modernizing, secularizing forces to see that religion will very rarely remain private, interior, and uninvolved in or unaffected by social, political, and economic life.

Returning to the complex definition and meaning of religion, we can see now why the way we have typically defined religion and applied that definition to the realm of politics is highly problematic. One contemporary scholar doing interesting work on this topic is Elizabeth Shakman Hurd of Northwestern University, who recently spoke at Butler as part of the Seminar on Religion and World Civilization. She suggests that, at least in the realm of politics, there are three irreducible forms or categories of religion at play, what she calls lived religion, expert religion, and governed religion. Lived religion refers to religion as it is actually practiced by living, breathing human beings, in all of its myriad forms and with all of its fluid identities and varying levels of commitment. Expert religion refers to religion as it is defined and demarcated by scholars, religious authorities, and political bodies. Finally, governed religion is religion so defined and demarcated by the experts, used for the purpose of governance by the state, specifically for the purpose of bestowing or protecting rights. It is within this latter category of governed religion that religious freedom is located. But we can see how problematic that

categorization can be, especially because it completely ignores lived religion, that is, religion as it is actually practiced. That, I suggest, is precisely the root of the problem we are facing now and will face more frequently in the future. What is potentially even more problematic is that courts and legislatures will be called on more frequently to define religion and religious expression and to determine what counts as genuine religion, a practice that on the face of it comes dangerously close to violating the Establishment Clause.

How Do We Maintain Freedom *of and from* Religion in a Secular State?

Finally, we return to Indiana's RFRA, now (hopefully) with a more nuanced understanding of religion and religious freedom and of the relationship between the religious and the secular and between church and state. I should say here unequivocally that I am committed to protecting the First Amendment rights of all Americans to have freedom *for* religion as well as freedom *from* religion. I also strenuously object to the RFRA, for both theological and political reasons (although for me, as for many others, the boundary between them is quite permeable). Theologically, I object to it because I think it represents a misguided reading of the Christian scriptures, a mistaken theological vision of Christian freedom, and a betrayal of the gospel. Politically, I object to it because I am committed to justice. As Martin Luther King said in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, an unjust law is a law that denigrates human dignity, while a just law is a law that promotes human dignity. In that same letter he suggested that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." In that light, the RFRA enshrines a grave injustice into our shared legal, political, and civic life.

However - and this is my main point - for me and for many other religious people, my political, economic, and social beliefs and actions are grounded in my religious commitments and cannot be so easily separated from them. This is as true for me as it is for those who lobbied

Gov. Pence to sign the RFRA into law and for those who would seek to use it to deny service to our LGBT neighbors.

So I want to close with a challenging question, one that I still have not begun to answer in any way that even remotely satisfies me. How can we maintain a robust secular democracy that guarantees religious freedom while also promoting justice, freedom, and civil rights for all? As we have seen, the Founders fundamentally misunderstood the nature and scope of religion by restricting it to private, interior beliefs that should have no bearing on our shared political, economic, and civic life. But religion cannot be so restricted, as we have seen time and again.

As we have seen in the landmark Supreme Court decision this past summer legalizing same-sex marriage across the country, in the grandstanding of Kim Davis in her role as a Kentucky county clerk claiming a religious exemption to issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples in her jurisdiction, and in the more recent incendiary xenophobic anti-Muslim comments made by Donald Trump and others, these questions will likely only increase in their frequency and their intensity. Perhaps rather than simply assume we can achieve a purely secular legal and political solution to what is just as fundamentally a theological problem, we must task Christian theologians, clergy, and laypersons to critique their own traditions where they fall short of the gospel. Likewise, we ought to invite voices from the many religious traditions that call America home into fruitful dialogue with a range of secular voices on how we might live together in a pluralistic community whose very future depends at least in part on learning to live creatively and fruitfully with such tensions.